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Pirapaharan, Chapter 24

by T. Sabaratnam

(Volume 2)

The Country Turns into Killing Field

Bus Massacre

I traced in Chapter 21 the events that led Pirapaharan to switch the mode of struggle from hit and run guerrilla warfare to sustained guerrilla combat and the manner in which the country slipped into the First Eelam War. The slide began with the first naval clash of 4 August 1984 and the retaliatory, savage land and sea attacks on Pirapaharan's birthplace, Valvettithurai, and in Jaffna town.

Tigers answered the attacks by the armed forces on 5 August with the Nediyaakadu landmine blast that killed eight police commandos, including Assistant Police Superintendent Siri Jayesundera, and with the Oddusuddan Police Station attack in which Inspector Ganemulla and seven policemen died. The army struck back with vengeance in Jaffna, shooting at civilians and burning private buildings. The Tigers damaged an armoured vehicle by flinging hand grenades and petrol bombs on it. The public rose in revolt and blocked the movement of the army by blockading the roads.

Events moved thereafter in quick succession. Police Superintendent Arthur Herath was killed in Vavuniya and the police retaliated by killing several civilians. The Chunnakam massacre of 9 August and the cold-blooded killing of ten members of a family who were travelling to attend a wedding the following night at Navatkuli estranged the Tamils further. The Mannar landmine blast of 11 August and the army's retaliatory attacks widened the region of revolt. The LTTE attacked the police stations at Valvettithurai and Kayts and launched the landmine war killing soldiers at Karaveddy, Neerveli, Point Pedro and Kokkilai. The army retaliation became more ferocious.



Hartley College, 2004

Soldiers retaliated by attacking Point Pedro town and killing 16 civilians following the landmine explosion that killed five policemen at Thikkam, a village close to that town. They also burnt down the 100-year-old library and science laboratory of Hartley College, an apex secondary school of Vadamarachchi. The police commando unit opened a special station next to the school which provoked the students to protest. The student population in the Jaffna district joined that protest, thus pitting the entire Tamil community against the police and the army.

Hartley College 2004 Amirthalingam protested against the Point Pedro killing from Chennai, but Athulathmudali ridiculed him saying that Amirthalingam did not know what was happening in Jaffna. He said Tamils had rejected Amirthalingam and company. Athulathmudali, during this time, was under pressure from the international community to explain the civilian killings. And Athulathmudali made use of the debating skills he had developed at the Oxford Union to answer the queries. The classic example was his answer to a query from a visiting British lawmaker, Jeremy Corbyn who inquired, from him about the shooting of a woman vegetable seller at the Chunnakam market by the airforce. He said the woman was killed accidentally when airforce gunners fired at the terrorists on the roof of the market!

Navy gunboats, which had been shelling coastal villages between Valvettithurai and Point Pedro since the Valvettithurai naval fight and the Nediyaakadu landmine attack, intensified their onslaught after the Thikkam blast. Shelling of coastal

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villages became a regular feature. On the first Sunday in September, as the Point Pedro parish priest was preparing for the Sunday liturgy, the navy launched an assault. The Church and the parish house were hit. A splinter hit the high roof right above the altar. A few houses behind the church were damaged.

On 15 September a shell hit the hut in which Thangathurai, a cobbler, lived with his family. Their hut was about half a kilometer from the coast, but a shell fell and burst opposite it. A splinter pierced his wife, Kalavathy's head and she died instantaneously. Thangathurai was injured and incapacitated for life.

Shells were also fired from moving armoured vehicles. Civilians were killed and crippled by this indiscriminate shelling. The Kokillai landmine attack that killed nine soldiers and injured four took place on 10 September 1984. The army patrol that went to the scene announced next day that it had killed four terrorists which the LTTE denied. It said the army had killed four civilians.

On the same night, 11 September, soldiers hijacked a private luxury bus travelling from Colombo to Jaffna with 46 passengers and shot dead 17 persons including the 60-year-old driver. Jaffna papers covered this brutal killing in graphic detail. Christopher Bastiam Pillai Anandaraja, a 29-year-youth, was one of the survivors interviewed by Eelanadu, a leading Tamil provincial daily. The following is the story he related:

I am living with my aunt in Kotahena. I boarded an express bus at 8 p.m. at Colombo Fort to travel to Jaffna. There were 46 passengers and two drivers, a Sinhalese and a Tamil. There were ten to fifteen ladies. Two of them were young girls. The bus halted near a boutique at Rambawe around 2 a.m. for tea. I had tea. The Tamil driver took the wheel over from his Sinhala colleague. Five sturdy soldiers, one of them in uniform, waved the bus to halt about ten kilometers from Vavuniya. The driver stopped the bus.

The soldier in uniform got in saying that they wanted to check the passengers to see whether any terrorists were in the bus. They were drunk. They had loaded rifles. One of them cursed the Tamils and said in a threatening manner: Your bastards kill Sinhala soldiers and you ---- (a string of filth)--- travel in luxury buses. You -(filth)---had killed eight policemen last night. We are going to kill all of you."

I got jittery. All started shivering. I said my prayers. I heard the soldier in uniform ordering the driver to get down. The driver refused. He said that he was responsible for the safety of the passengers. He was kicked with the butt of the gun. He started praying aloud. "Muruga. Muruga, safeguard all these people," he prayed. He was pushed out of the bus and ordered to run. He ran towards the shrub that bordered the road. A soldier shot him. He fell dead.

The soldiers then gathered the youths. I crouched under my seat. They ordered the youths to get down. They got down and started running. Soldiers fired at them. They fell dead.

The soldiers came to the seat under which I was hiding. They found me and dragged me out. They hit me with the rifle butt. A soldier kicked me on the face with his boots. I jumped out of the bus and crept under it. I found four others already hiding there.

The soldiers then left me and went to the two girls in the bus. We crawled to the other side and ran into the jungle. We walked a long distance before we stumbled on a Tamil village. From there we escaped," Anandarajah said.

Sixty-four- year- old Kandaiah Paramanathan was one of the other survivors. He was interviewed for the rest of the story. He said he boarded the bus at Wellawatte, the southern part of Colombo where Tamils live in large number.

"I did not get down at Rambawe," he said. "I am a heart patient. I was sleeping when the soldiers entered the bus. I woke up when the people started shouting. There were five of them. Only one was in uniform. Others were wearing shorts and T-shirts. We were certain they were also soldiers.

"They first shot the driver. Then they killed the young boys. Then they pulled out the girls and the women. The girls and the women wailed and we shouted. They threatened us and said if we don't keep quiet all will be shot. They dragged the women behind the bush. I fainted."

The sordid bus massacre upset the TULF leaders who were in Chennai. The All Party Conference had been postponed for 21 September. At its last meeting on 3 September, Jayewardene showed slight flexibility and took up the topic of the unit of devolution for discussion. Though the UNP delegation and the Buddhist monks insisted that districts would be the units of devolution, Indian advisors treated it as an opening to canvass to make the province the unit instead.

Amirthalingam sent a strongly worded telegram to Jayewardene. He asked, "How can we talk to the government when its army is engaged in killing innocent bus passengers?" To placate the TULF, India and the angry world opinion Jayewardene ordered an inquiry and a police team that visited the scene of the shooting, found the bus damaged and the abandoned clothes of women strewn around.

The LTTE continued its landmine attacks in the latter half of September and October. Two policemen were killed in a landmine explosion in the third week of September. Colombo announced on 22 September that a naval patrol boat had killed 25 terrorists travelling to Jaffna from Tamil Nadu.

Lalith's Tough Stand

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Around this time N. Ram of *The Hindu*, who was specializing on the Sri Lankan Tamil problem, did an exhaustive interview with Lalith Athulathmudali, who was much sought after by local and visiting journalists. Athulathmudali acted as the government's political and military spokesman. He was also the spokesman of the All Party Conference. Ram's report appeared in *The Hindu* of 22 September 1984 and was reproduced in *The Island* of 24 September.



Ram structured his interview into two parts. Firstly, he questioned Athulathmudali about the All Party Conference and the possible solution to the Tamil problem. Athulathmudali maintained that the only solution the Sinhala people would accept was the one based on District Development Councils. He said that the government was not in a position to go further. If it did, the government would collapse and more extreme sections of the Sinhala society would come to power making the prospects of a political solution more difficult.

Secondly, Ram questioned about the failure of the government to discipline the army. Athulathmudali did not deny army retaliations. Instead, he tried to justify them, saying that they lost control of themselves when their colleagues were killed. When Ram suggested that the government could adopt normal disciplinary procedures like courtmartial to prosecute members of the army engaged in war crimes, Athulathmudali took a strict legalistic stand, saying the lack of evidence acceptable to the courts of law was a major problem and spoke about the legal rights of the soldiers.

Athulathmudali went even further. He said the civilians living near the scene of attack on the security forces were guilty of failure to provide information about the preparations for attack.

Following Ram's interview, *The Hindu* sent one of its senior reporters, S. Parthasarathy, to do an investigative report about the ground situation in the Jaffna peninsula. He came to Colombo and travelled by Yal Devi, the intercity express train that left Fort Station at 2 p.m. every day. His two-part report, which was printed on 16 and 18 October 1984, captures the tense atmosphere that prevailed in the Jaffna peninsula in mid-October, 1984. I will quote a few paragraphs and invite readers to refer to the piece **Tamil Genocide, As The Hindu Reported it – 20 Years Ago** by Sachi Sri Kantha posted on Sangam.org on 15 October 2004. *The Hindu* headlined the report **Misdeeds' of the army, cultural genocide**.

This is Parthasarathy's portrayal of the environment in the train as it sped past Vavuniya and disgorged its passengers at Jaffna Station at about 9.30 in the night: "Travelling by the only train operating to Jaffna, this correspondent saw virtually all the passengers getting tense as the train crossed into the Tamil areas. Military men in uniform, tough looking guys with their loaded weapons in ready-to-shoot condition, spread themselves through the compartments. In fact, it looked like entering another country with the uniformed men getting hold of passengers at random and demanding a look at their identity cards." At the Jaffna Railway Station as the day was wearing away, the crowd surging out of the platform was huge but none could escape the gaze, the attention and perhaps the wrath of the security forces. Jaffna town itself looks to a casual visitor normal and calm, but the superficiality dissolves after he has been there for some hours. He will see military trucks roaring through the roads at intervals 'itching for a brush with the other road users.' In their own homeland, lamented a Government official, Tamils suffer 'the indignity of having to carry identity cards with them all the time as in South Africa.' 'Don't take things on their looks. Take everything on evidence.' warned the official, his tone expressing caution and fear." Parthasarathy on army reprisals: "During the last week of September and the early part of this month, even as this correspondent was travelling extensively in the area, the Northern province had a long tally of 'incidents' where the security forces (according to the victims) unleashed 'unwarranted brutal assaults on innocent people.' The victims, quite a few of whom were met, are aware that the army men characterize the assaults as 'reprisals for the militants' activities like robbing banks and jewellery shops and raiding armouries,' but they are unable to recall instances where the armed forces have been able to apprehend the culprit 'boys' and deal with them. 'Instead, only innocent boys are rounded up and either returned later after torture or done away with,' they noted."

And,

"At each place visited by this correspondent, he heard the same story – the brutality unleashed by the security forces on the innocent civilian population in the shape of rounding up boys between the ages of 18 and 35 for torture, burning houses, churches and the market place and so on. The closer one moves to the

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different areas, the more apparent becomes the 'misdeeds' of the servicemen. Wherever one went, one could find the people in mourning for somebody in the family killed by army men or emotionally upset for boys rounded up from their families. Perhaps for the 100th time, this correspondent listened to people saying the army in the North frequently went berserk. The tally of 'incidents' reported by the people is long."

About the feeling among the people he reported,

"An unarmed population, men, women and children, feel they are kept under a kind of siege, within the peninsula by an armed force of several thousand men. One bank official pointed out that when there was a robbery in the bank on a certain night and when the occurrence was reported promptly to the police and the army, neither of them cared to visit the scene till the next morning; they felt safe to come only in broad daylight and sprayed bullets indiscriminately, killing passers-by. It was only when the doctors from the hospital opposite (Jaffna Hospital) protested saying they would stop treating wounded servicemen, did the armed forces halt their madness, said one eyewitness. He also said policemen were not available for law and order duties as they were afraid to come out of the police station. This naturally encouraged criminals to indulge in vandalism."

Israeli Strategy

The people of Jaffna saw an Israeli hand in these terror tactics. They saw a parallel between the terrorizing of the Palestinians by Israel and the methods adopted by the forces guided by the Jayewardene-Athulathmudali duo. India read it as a challenge and RAW, some of the Tamil militants told me, induced them to take the war to Colombo and other Sinhala areas. The LTTE was reluctant, but EROS obliged. (Note - A prominent member of the then EROS group told me the details, but requested me not to use them as he was in an organization now very close to India and the Sri Lankan government. I honour my undertaking though my informant was killed a few months ago.)

During the period Parthasarathy was in Sri Lanka - the last week of September and first week of October - several journalists from leading media institutions from India, Europe, Britain and the US came to Colombo as Sri Lanka had earned sufficient notoriety as the killing field of South Asia and as Mark Tully, the renowned New Delhi-based BBC correspondent put it, "the most undisciplined army in the world."

I met most of the foreign correspondents who descend on Colombo when death, disaster and misfortunes had fallen on this thrice-blessed island at the weekly post-cabinet media briefing which I covered for the Daily News from 1978 to 1997 except for short breaks. August and September 1984 brought a number of these foreign correspondents.

The *Newsweek* correspondent wrote in his dispatch, printed in the 27 August 1984 issue, that most of the Tamils killed by the security forces in the north and east were non-combatants. The correspondent said that even Sinhalese refused to believe the government claim that, except for a few, all others killed were terrorists. He also said that Sinhalese and Tamils said that the Jayewardene government would not usher in a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic problem.

The *Washington Post*, which said Jaffna resembled a ghost town in the night, added that the armed forces were engaged in revenge killing of civilians. It said the Jayewardene government was not interested in a political solution. The government had opted for a military solution and wanted to achieve it by intimidating the Tamil people.

The popular progressive Mumbai weekly *Blitz* in its 18 August issue printed a special report by its reporter in Colombo which highlighted the situation in the Jaffna peninsula and Mullaitivu. It backed it up with an editorial which raised three specific issues:

- The shelling of the coastal villages in the Jaffna peninsula by the navy and the army.
- The destruction of Tamil villages in Mullaitivu in the guise of setting up militarized Sinhala border villages. It said bulldozers and armoured vehicles were used to flatten ancient Tamil villages.
- It condemned aerial bombing. It said no other country in the world bombed its own citizens.

Blitz also answered the Colombo propaganda that it was dealing with Tamil terrorism as India was dealing with Sikh terrorism. *Blitz* said in Sri Lanka it was state terrorism against a people who were demanding their basic rights. Indian anger was reflected by the *Blitz* editorial.

The Indian delegation made a similar statement at the Geneva Human Rights Commission in the second week of September.

Bombs in Colombo

Bombs exploded for the first time in Colombo on 22 October 1984. (Please note that Indira Gandhi was alive at this time and she was annoyed with Jayewardene for opting for a military solution.) The fight that was intensified in the northeast by the LTTE was brought to Colombo by EROS. It was brought to Colombo as a tool to pressure Jayewardene to return to the path of a political solution which he had abandoned. India was worried that Jayewardene's military solution had inducted into Sri Lanka international forces - Pakistan, China, Israel and US in that order - inimical to Indian interests. Encouraging a political solution to the Tamil problem was India's strategy to halt that shift.

(Note - That policy holds good even now. India does not welcome Pirapaharan winning a separate Tamil Eelam by military means. India is also equally hostile to the Sri Lankan government subjugating the Tamils, i.e. the LTTE, militarily. India's

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activities, including today's proposed defence pact, are extensions of this policy.)

A tense atmosphere prevailed the whole of that day in Colombo. The first explosion took place near the Foreshore Police Station, Kotahena at 5.30 a.m. The bomb exploded accidentally when Paripooranan, a young engineer from Kayts, was carrying it to be placed near the police station. He died. At least nine other explosions occurred within the next four hours in different parts of the city, spreading panic. Many travelers were injured when a bomb exploded near the Fort railway station. Other explosions were reported near the radio and television stations, the central bus stand, the Home Affairs Ministry and a few other places. The bombs were all hidden in garbage tins. Two Tamil men died in a house in Peliyagoda when another bomb exploded accidentally.

The government was upset. Athulathmudali was perturbed. He called a special press conference. He also issued a special appeal to the people at 10 a.m. calling on the people to remain calm. The appeal said the intention of the terrorists was to provoke the Sinhala people to attack the Tamil people. It called upon the people not to fall into the terrorist trap.

The explosions gave two clear messages to the government and the Sinhala people. The main message was that Tamil militants had the capacity to take the war to the capital city and to the Sinhala-dominated areas. The second message was that India would help escalate the war if Colombo opted for a military solution.



Keeny Meeny Services

New Delhi and Colombo military analysts realized that Indira Gandhi was reacting harshly to Jayewardene's three-track policy. She was reacting especially to the military solution which employed manpower and expertise from Israeli intelligence agencies MOSSAD and SHINBET and Keeny Meeny Services (KMS), a private security company comprising mostly former members of Britain's crack Special Air Services including Rhodesians, South Africans and other veterans of guerrilla wars, and military hardware from Pakistan, China and South Africa.

Lalith Athulathmudali and Ravi Jayewardene, though they loathed each other, were fully supportive of the Israeli strategy of terrorizing civilians and setting up of militarized border villages. Opposition politicians, especially SLFP leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike, were not enamoured of the Israeli strategies. She repeatedly voiced her opposition. She warned that Israeli strategies had failed to subdue the Palestinians and predicted that they would meet the same fate in Sri Lanka. This is what happened. Tamils were not scared into submission. Their opposition grew. They became united. Their unity swept away even the once popular TULF.

Lalith Athulathmudali was behind the hiring of the services of KMS. The London *Daily News* exposed the role of the KMS in Sri Lanka in March 1987 and the *Washington Times*, in a well-researched article on 19 May 1987, added sensitive details, but most of these facts were known to India by September 1984.

The London *Daily News* said that dozens of KMS men were serving in Sri Lanka and they were paid a tax-free salary of 33,000 US dollars a year. Richard S. Ehrlich of the *Washington Times* revealed that the number of KMS men who served in Sri Lanka was at least 35.

Ehrlich said the brawny British mercenaries were based at Kattukurunda training the crack Special Task Forces to kill Tamil guerrillas. He questioned KMS Commander Ken White, an ex-Special Air Services colonel, British High Commission press spokesman Jack Jones, Colombo-based Western diplomats and Lalith Athulathmudali on the role of the KMS men.

Ken White told Ehrlich, "We are employees of the Sri Lankan government, and I would ask you to listen to what the national security minister and the British High Commission have to say about us. More than that, I have no comment."

Jack Jones, carefully choosing his words, said, "The British government views the presence of the KMS in Sri Lanka as a matter between the company and the Sri Lankan government," and added, "There are no British servicemen in Sri Lanka. I understand some of them are former servicemen."

Jack Jones also said, "It's not for the British government to approve or disapprove of their presence. As far as I'm aware, it's a legitimate commercial company which has a legitimate commercial relationship with the Sri Lankan government in a strictly training role, and I understand that the employees do not take part in operations."

Jones also quoted Britain's Home Minister of State David Waddington, who said on a previous visit that the KMS presence is "likely to be a good thing because it would probably improve the standard of training of the Sri Lankan armed forces."

Ehrlich quoted a Western envoy as saying London was somewhat embarrassed because KMS involvement in the civil war "implies Britain is involved." He said London desired a political solution to Sri Lanka's woes and, when the Sinhalese government concentrated on killing Tamil separatists with the aid of KMS, it gave less priority to a political solution.

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The London *Daily News* in its report quoted KMS commando Sammy Dougherty as saying, "Maybe there are atrocities, but not as many as there would be if we weren't here. Indiscipline causes atrocities. Scared, badly trained troops cause atrocities. But what I teach helps stop them. We're saving lives here. We're teaching self-control."

Ehrlich probed the *Daily News* report which quoted Tamils as accusing KMS of turning the Special Task Force into a brutal death squad that terrorizes innocent Tamil civilians, torturing and killing them in the eastern part of the island. Ken White told him their training had helped to reduce atrocities. Western diplomats told him that they had compiled evidence of numerous massacres.

Ehrlich interviewed Lalith Athulathmudali. He told him that the government had not much hope on a political solution. He said the mercenaries had contributed to a military solution.

"We made use of them primarily to train the police and create a paramilitary group," Athulathmudali said, "and our men have learned a lot of new tactics. They've brought areas where they are under fairly good control." Athulathmudali added that citizens' complaints about atrocities allegedly committed by the army and the Special Task Force had dropped 42 percent after KMS started training them. He denied that KMS men were involved in combat operations. The following was Ehrlich's conclusion: Although KMS is here in a training and advisory role, the line between that and actual combat gets blurred at times, particularly in the air war.

There are, for example, 35 KMS men training Sri Lankans to fly U.S.- built Bell 212 and 412 helicopter gunships. When flying over battle zones, according to one source, "The KMS man sits in the co-pilot seat so a Sri Lankan is captain of the aircraft."

The problem occurs when there is ground fire. Then, said the source, "the Sri Lankan guy in the rear of the helicopter shoots back and the KMS pilot takes control" because he has more experience dodging enemy fire.

Indira Gandhi was annoyed by the large scale of influx of weapons and mercenaries. Narasimha Rao made a statement about it in the Lokh Sabah. He said India had reason to believe that foreign military assistance, other than from India, had been sought. He urged Sri Lanka to pursue the path of a political solution to the Tamil situation and said any attempt at a military solution would prove disastrous.

Jayewardene reacted with anger. He launched a virulent anti- India campaign, accusing India of playing big brother and ridiculed its claim of regional power. His effort to embarrass India had the opposite effect to that intended. It worsened the situation. Large numbers of men and a huge quantity of material were moved to the northeast for use by the Tamil militant groups. The LTTE sent the most modern weapons imported with the cash provided by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran. (Details in the next chapter.) RAW encouraged the militant groups to step up their armed campaign.



Retaliatory attacks and massacres carried out by the police and the armed forces in August, September and October 1984 pushed the Tamil people totally behind the militants. They revolted against the Sri Lankan state. They transferred their allegiance totally from the TULF to the militants. The Sri Lankan state lost the loyalty of the Tamil people. The Sri Lankan state had been reduced to a Sinhala state. In the following three months, Tamil militants led by the LTTE acquired territory and started building the infrastructure needed to establish a state for the Tamils.

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Chapter 25 Militants Acquire Territory

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